

Bench language

Bench (*Benchnon*, **Shenon** or **Mernon**, formerly called **Gimira** ^[3]) is a Northern Omotic language of the "Gimojan" subgroup, spoken by about 174,000 people (in 1998) in the Bench Maji Zone of the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Region, in southern Ethiopia, around the towns of Mizan Teferi and Shewa Gimira. It has three varieties: Benchnon, Shenon, and Mernon, which Blench (2006) considers to be distinct languages but which Rapold (2006) states are "...mutually intelligible...varieties of one and the same language".^[3]

In unusual variance from most of the other languages in Africa, Bench has retroflex consonant phonemes.^[4] The language is also noteworthy in that it has six phonemic tones, one of only a handful of languages in the world that have this many.^[5] Bench has a whistled form used primarily by male speakers, which permits communication over greater distances than spoken Bench. The whistle can be created using the lips or made from a hollow created with both hands. Additionally, this form of the language may be communicated via the 5-stringed krar.^[6]

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Bench	
 <i>Benchnon</i>	
Pronunciation	bentʃnon
Native to	Ethiopia
Region	Bench Maji Zone, SNNPR
Native speakers	348,000 Bench Non, 8,000 Mer, 490 She (2007) ^[1]
Language family	Afro-Asiatic - Omotic - North Bench
Dialects	Benc Non (Benesho) Mer (Mieru) She (Kaba)
Language codes	
ISO 639-3	bcq
Glottolog	benc1235 (http://glottolog.org/resource/language/id/benc1235) ^[2]
Linguasphere	16-BBA-a

Phonology

The phonemic vowels of Bench are /i e a o u/.

There are six phonemic tones: five level tones (numbered 1 to 5 in the literature, with 1 being the lowest) and one rising tone 23 /4/. The top tone is sometimes realized as a high rising 45 [1].^[7] On the vowel *o*, they are /ǒ ó ō ò Ǔ ǔ/

The consonants are:

		<u>Bilabial</u>	<u>Coronal</u>	<u>Palato-alveolar</u>	<u>Retroflex</u>	<u>Velar</u>	<u>Glottal</u>
<u>Nasal</u>		m	n				
<u>Plosive</u>	<u>Voiceless</u>	p	t			k	ʔ
	<u>Voiced</u>	b	d			g	
	<u>Ejective</u>	pʼ	tʼ			kʼ	
<u>Affricate</u>	<u>Voiceless</u>		ts	tʃ	tɕ		
	<u>Ejective</u>		tsʼ	tʃʼ	tɕʼ		
<u>Fricative</u>	<u>Voiceless</u>		s	ʃ	ɕ		h
	<u>Voiced</u>		z	ʒ	ʐ		
<u>Rhotic</u>			r				
<u>Approximant</u>			l	j			

All of these can occur palatalized, but only before /a/, suggesting an alternate analysis of a sixth phonemic vowel /ja/. Labialized consonants are reported for [p, b, s, g,] and [ʔ], but their phonemic status is unclear; they only occur after /i/.

For the phoneme /p/ the realizations of [p^h] and [f] are in free variation; /j/ has the allophone [w] before back vowels.

The syllable structure is (C)V(C)(C)(C) + tone or (C) N (C), where C represents any consonant, V any vowel, N any nasal, and brackets an optional element. CC clusters consist of a continuant followed by a plosive, fricative, or affricate; in CCC clusters, the first consonant must be one of /r/ /j/ /m/ /p/ or /pʼ /, the second either /n/ or a voiceless fricative, and the third /t/ or /k/.

Grammar

Nouns

Plurals may optionally be formed by adding the suffix [-n̄d]; however, these are rarely used except with definite nouns. E.g.: [wǔ ɪŋg̃n̄d] "her relatives"; [äts̄n̄dī bá kǎŋg] "all the people".

Pronouns

Personal pronouns

English	oblique	subject	locative	vocative
I	[tá]	[tān]	[tātʼ n̄]	
you (sg.)	[nī]	[nēn]	[nītʼ n̄]	[wǒ] (m.), [hà] (f.)
you (hon.)	[jìnt]	[jìnt]	[jìnt]	
he	[íí]	[jīs]	—	
he (hon.)	[íts]	[íts]	[íts]	
she	[wǔ]	[wūs]	—	
she (hon.)	[gēn]	[gēn]	[gēn]	
himself/herself	[bá]	[bān]	[bātʼ n̄]	
we (excl.)	[nú]	[nūn]	[nūtʼ n̄]	
we (incl.)	[nǐ]	[nīn]	[nītʼ n̄]	
you (pl.)	[jìntàjkʼ n̄]	[jìntàjkʼ n̄]	[jìntàjkʼ n̄]	
they	[ítsàjkʼ n̄]	[ítsàjkʼ n̄]	[ítsàjkʼ n̄]	

The word [bá] goes slightly beyond being a reflexive pronoun; it can mark any third person that refers to the subject of the sentence, e.g.:

[jǐsī bá dōr gòtùē]
he.S own sheep sell.he.Fin

"he sold his (own) sheep"

[bòdám hāŋk' á bājístāgùṣṇ pānts' à ěz]
road.abl go.self self.be.stat.det.when leopard-NPMk big see.he.Fin

"when he was going along the road, he saw a big leopard"

The oblique form is basic, and serves as object, possessive, and adverbial. The subject form has three variants: normal (given above), emphatic - used when the subject is particularly prominent in the sentence, especially sentence-initially - and reduced, used as part of a verb phrase. The "locative" term means "to, at, or for one's own place or house", e.g.:

[kàrtá tāt' ñ tã hāŋk' ùē]
return.I to.my.house I go.I.Fin

"I went home"

Determiners

The main determiners are "that, the" (masc. [ùṣ], fem. [èn], pl. [ènd]) and "this" (masc. [hàṣ], fem. [hàn], pl. [hànd]). As suffixes on a verb or an ablative or locative phrase, they indicate a relative clause. E.g.:

[átsñdà] [hàndīs] [hǎrá] [bād] [átsñdà?]
person.pl.NPMk these.O what.abl separate make.fut.Intl?

"how can I separate these people?"

[átsín kětń jískèn]
woman house.loc be.that

"the woman who is in the house"

Demonstratives

The demonstratives include [háj] "here", [ēk] "there (nearby)", [jìŋk] "there (far away)", [nēg] "down there", [nèk] "up there". Alone, or with the determiner suffixes [ùṣ] or [àṣ] added, these function as demonstrative pronouns "this person", "that person", etc. With the noun phrase marker [-à], they become demonstrative adjectives. E.g.:

[hàn nás dàdñ àtāgùṣṇ]
here man near reach.stat.det.when

"when he came near to the man..."

[njā?à nēgà hàndī]
boy.NPMk down.there.NPMk det.S

"these boys down there"

Numbers

The numbers are:

1	[māt']
2	[nám]
3	[káz]
4	[ód]
5	[ùtɕ]
6	[sàpṃ]
7	[nàpṃ]
8	[njàrtṃ]
9	[irstṃ]
10	[tám]
100	[bǎl]
1000	[wñm]

20, 30, etc. are formed by adding [tàm] "ten" (with tone change) to the unit. In compound numbers, [-á] is added to each 'figure, thus:

13 [támá kázá]

236 [nám bǎlá kǎztámá sàpṃá]

When a cardinal number functions as an adjective, the suffix [-ās] can be added (*e.g.* [njāʔà kázās] "three children"). Ordinal numbers are formed by suffixing [-nás] to the cardinal, *e.g.*: [ódnás] "fourth".

Adjectives

Adjectives are sometimes intensified by changing the tone to top; *e.g.* [ěz] "big" → [ě́z] "very big".

Verbs

Verbs with monosyllabic roots can have three different forms of their active stems: the singular imperative, which is just the root; the past stem, usually identical to the root but sometimes formed by adding *-k* (with changes to the preceding consonant); and the future stem, usually identical to the root but sometimes formed by changing the tone from mid 3 to high 4 or from bottom 1 to top 5. Some have causative (formed by adding [-ās] or [-ʔ], and changing mid tone to high) and passive (formed by adding [-ṃ], [-t], or [-k] to the causative) forms. Verbal nouns are formed from the stem, sometimes with tone change or addition or [-t].

Verbs with polysyllabic roots have at least two forms, one with an intransitive or passive meaning and one with a transitive or causative meaning; the former ends in [-ṃ], the latter in [-ās]. A passive may be formed by ending in [-āsṃ]. Verbal nouns are formed by taking the bare stem without [-ṃ] or [-ās].

Compound verbs are formed with [màk] "say" or [màs] "cause to say", a formation common among Ethiopian languages.

The primary tenses are simple past (formed from the past stem), future (future stem plus [-ṃs-]), present perfect (from present participle stem); negative (future stem plus [-árǵ-]). *E.g.*: [hām] → [hāṃk' ùē] "he went"; [hámsṃsùē] "he will go"; [hāṃk' ísùē] "he has gone".

There are four corresponding participles: past (formed from the past stem), present perfect (formed from the past stem with the suffix [-ís-], [-íǵ], or [-áǵk' -]), imperfect (formed from the future stem with the stative suffix [-āǵ-]), and negative (formed from the future stem with the negative suffix [-árǵ-] or [-ù-] or a person/number marker.) The order of affixes is: root-(tense)-(negative)-(foc. pn.)-person/number-marker.

Orthography and literature

A Latin-based orthography was adopted in 2008.^[1] Previously, the New Testament had been published in the Bench language using an orthography based on the Ethiopian syllabary. Tones were not indicated. Retroflex consonants were indicated by such techniques as using extra symbols from the syllabary (the "*nigus* s") and forming new symbols (the addition of an extra arm on

the left side for "t").

Notes

1. Bench (<https://www.ethnologue.com/18/language/bcq/>) at *Ethnologue* (18th ed., 2015)
2. Hammarström, Harald; Forkel, Robert; Haspelmath, Martin, eds. (2017). "Bench" (<http://glottolog.org/resource/languoid/id/benc1235>). *Glottolog 3.0*. Jena, Germany: Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History.
3. Rapold 2006
4. Breeze 1988.
5. Wedekind 1983, 1985a, 1985b.
6. Wedekind 1983
7. Note that this is the East Asian tone numbering convention, and the opposite of the literature for other African languages, where 1 is high and 5 is low. The issue will be avoided here by using **IPA** diacritics.



Bench New Testament, ISBN 9966-40-063-X

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External links

- Wedekind, Klaus. 1983. A Six-Tone Language in Ethiopia (https://web.archive.org/web/20110719053906/http://www.kwedekind.de/Eingang1/PdfFiles/1983_ASixToneLanguage.pdf)
- Wedekind, Klaus. 1985a. http://www.kwedekind.de/Eingang1/PdfFiles/1985_WhyBenchHasFiveLevelTonesToday.pdf
- Wedekind, Klaus. 1985a. http://www.kwedekind.de/Eingang1/PdfFiles/1985_Thoughts_when_Drawing_a_Map_of_Tone_Languages.pdf
- World Atlas of Language Structures information: http://wals.info/languoid/lect/wals_code_gim
- Website maintained by the Bench community, on culture and language, in the Bench language (<http://www.bench-web.com>)

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